

NEHEMIAH'S ADVERSARIES (Neh. 6:5-19)

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah combine to form the penultimate book in the Hebrew Old Testament. It is an amazing account of how God brought His people back from the brink of destruction, which was planned in the minds of its enemies. ... Indeed, throughout its history Israel has often been threatened with extinction. For example, the Pharaoh in Egypt ... and during the times of the Judges and King David, there were the Moabites, the Canaanites, the Ammonites, the Amalekites, the Midianites, and the Philistines. Then, during the period of the prophets there were the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, the Romans ... and in the post-Biblical era, the Turkish Ottoman Empire, the rise of Islam, and the Crusades ... Within the past century Adolf Hitler and, more recently, the threat of the nations surrounding the land of Israel today. ... Why do so many hate the Jews? ... The underlying reason is because they are the chosen earthly nation of God, as He declared through the prophet Moses, **Dt. 7:6** thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. ... They are the people the Lord promised to Abram, **Gen. 12:2** I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: **3** And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

And so, Nehemiah and his people are in a predicament once more. They had the enemy coming at them from the north, under Sanballat, ... and from the east, under Tobiah ... and from the south, led by Geshem (or, Gashmu, v.6) ... and the armies of Ashdod coming from the west. ... They had the half-constructed wall around the city, and the gates 'ready to be hung' in place. They had dealt with the dissension 'among their own ranks' at a time when it must have felt as if everything was 'teetering on a knife-edge'! It was like trying to decide if 'your glass was half-empty or half-full'. You did not dare relax your guard for you did not know when, how, or where the enemy would strike or appear next. ...

And something else too ... they began rebuilding the wall during the hot summer days of August. Physically, they would have been perspiring, thirsty, dusty, sore, exhausted, and *yet* they completed the wall, **6:15** the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days (21st September 444 BC). ... But it was hard. It was gruelling. It was exhausting during those uncertain and frightening times. ... *Will* Jerusalem last, or will it *again* suffer invasion and humiliation? If so, what's the point in *trying* to keep going on?! ... The enemy is on the increase. They are not going away. They are

not keeping quiet ... Why should we endure such a hopelessly impossible task?
... Don't you see how relevant the story of Nehemiah is for our present times?!

Today also the enemy of the Church of the Lord Jesus is gathering outside 'the city wall' expecting to witness the demise of God's people ... They are gloating as they watch the decline of church attendance and church buildings turning into all kinds of places never initially intended. ... The Church is facing increasing hostility ... And even inside the Church, the enemy has successfully 'crept in unawares', with their diluted 'form of godliness', 'turning itching ears' away from the truth with their 'vain janglings', by casting doubt on God's infallible, inerrant, and inspired Word and rendering it as little more than fable, fantasy, and fiction. ... These are desperate times, as they were also in Nehemiah's day.

At the beginning of chapter six Sanballat and Geshem decided not to enter Jerusalem but instead, to send Nehemiah an invitation, You come out to us ... Come, let us meet together away out in the countryside (v.2). But Nehemiah knew what they were at, so his reply was swift. He told them there was no point meeting for he was too busy in Jerusalem and he had nothing to talk to them about (v.3)! They tried again, and again, and again, and again ... and Nehemiah sent them the same reply each time. He did not even have to think about it for he had nothing to discuss with these enemies of God and God's people!

Then, the fifth time they sent their message (v.6,7), Sanballat mischievously informed Nehemiah he had received a 'report' that he (Nehemiah) was inciting his people against the Babylonian king. The rumour was that he and his people were rebuilding the city wall so they could re-establish the Jewish monarchy and crown Nehemiah king. ... Obviously, if the report were considered credible, the Babylonian king would have mobilised his armies to obliterate Jerusalem.

Nehemiah, of course, refuted the accusation because it was not true (v.8). He and his people were planning no such thing as Sanballat claimed. Nevertheless, the lies of the enemy brought great fear among them (v.9). However, Nehemiah stood secure and steadfast because he believed God was still in control, regardless of the intentions of his enemies. Consequently, he did not appeal to them, or fall into their trap of going down into the valley of Ono to try and convince them for there would have been no point ... and they would undoubtedly have captured and killed him ... Instead, he prayed to the God of Israel, O God, strengthen my hands (v.9) ... "Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere ... Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? ... *Take it to the Lord in prayer*" ... and that is what Nehemiah did, "When your enemies

assail and your heart begins to fail, Don't forget that God in Heaven answers prayer; He will make a way for you and will lead you safely through, - *Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there*".

The enemy *surrounded* the people of God. Granted, they had not been overtly active for a while because their previous attempts against the Jews to deter them rebuilding the wall and rehangng the gates had failed. ... However, they had not gone away, they were still there ... *the enemy does not give up easily!* He has an excessive passion to thwart the Lord's work at every level! Even when he might seem defeated, he is merely dormant ... like the crocodile or alligator lying menacingly in the water, with its eyes lurking just above the surface. ... And Satan keeps threatening and trying to frighten God's people, - "You're beaten, you've lost, you're finished ... Give up for it's over! Your witness has collapsed. You are decrepit and feeble ... Do the decent thing and quit!" ... But that is not what God has planned for He has promised the gates of Hell will never succeed in 'prevailing against' His Church!

And after praying to the Lord, Nehemiah went through the streets of Jerusalem to the house of a man he considered a friend, or at least, an acquaintance ... to the home of Shemaiah [*'heard by Jehovah'*], who was said to be a prophet. Shemaiah was in 'lock-down', in isolation (shut up', v.10). He 'spun a yarn' to Nehemiah about how a disaster was coming upon the city. Listening intently though, Nehemiah realized Shemaiah was trying to catch him off-guard by claiming his life was in danger. ... That, of course, was no surprise for Nehemiah already *knew* his life was in danger but how Nehemiah knew something was wrong with Shemaiah's 'prophecy' was confirmed when Shemaiah, - who was probably also a priest, - encouraged him to *break* the Law of Moses, - no proper priest would have counselled such a thing! ... Shemaiah told Nehemiah they both should run together into the temple to hide (v.10) ... into an area for priests that Shemaiah had access to, but Nehemiah, - a non-priest, - had not. ... At that point, Nehemiah knew what Shemaiah was up to because God would not send a true prophet to tell him to break His law, as Isaiah had previously declared, To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them (Is. 8:20). Consequently, Nehemiah rejected Shemaiah's instruction (v.11) for he saw him for what he truly was, - 'a wolf in sheep's clothing' ... and he discovered he was working covertly for Tobiah and Sanballat (v.12,13), along with others in Jerusalem, including the prophetess Noadiah [*'meeting with Jehovah'*], and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear (v.14).

The enemy does not avoid places where God's people meet. In fact, that is where he is attracted to and it is where he is extremely dangerous. He creeps in unawares, as Jesus warned, **Mt. 7:15** Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. ... On the outside, they look harmless and credible, but inside they are driven by deception and hatred for the truth of God and His people. They connive to twist His Word and unashamedly teach blatant error. They blur the parameters of God's truth as they appear as 'light', but inside, they are full of darkness. ... They are difficult, and treacherous, and complicated. They love their own authority, and they abuse power to ensnare the naïve and the gullible. They abhor correction and shun obedience to God's Word. Humility and repentance are absent in their 'gospel' ... and they set out to destroy anyone who confronts them. They manipulate the power of words for their selfish means. They shape their smiles to dazzle the unsuspecting and the immature. There is no 'fruit of the Holy Spirit' in them for there are no characteristics or traits of a person who truly knows Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

Paul warned Timothy about them, **II Tim. 3:13** evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived. ... How do you contend with them though? ... **14** But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them: **15** And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. **16** All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: **17** That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

Don't be waylaid, Timothy! Don't be 'side-tracked', Nehemiah! Keep doing the work God has set before you to do ... keep on building those walls of Jerusalem ... When the enemy could not stop him, they tried to lure him *down* (v.3) into the plain of Ono for a meeting where they could easily have overcome him ... And when that did not work, they tried 'from the inside' with Shemaiah. ... How we need to *be aware* of Satan's treacherous plans to bring God's people *down*! The day is drawing closer when Christ will return, and Satan knows he will be bound and cast into the bottomless pit for one thousand years ... so he is *extra* busy today! But just as Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem, and all the rest of the enemy could not stop the rebuilding of the walls and the city, neither can Satan prevent the ongoing work of God.

Nehemiah teaches us to be vigilant ... and to beware of the adversaries. He teaches to diligently pursue God's will for God's glory. He also shows us the benefits and rewards of faithfulness as we keep our 'hands to the plough' and progress in prayerfulness, perseverance, and determination. ... He illustrates how being a Christian is neither for the faint-hearted nor the uncommitted, as Charles Wesley has so wisely illustrated in his old hymn ...

Watched by the world's malignant eye,
Who load us with reproach and shame.
As servants of the Lord most high,
As zealous for His glorious Name,
We ought in all His paths to move,
With holy fear and humble love.

That wisdom, Lord, on us bestow,
From every evil to depart;
To stop the mouth of every foe,
While, upright both in life and heart,
The proofs of Godly fear we give,
And show them how the Christians live.